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ABSTRACT

This study examines the growing trend of reading movements in Japan and their origins. There are three main movements: Animacion a la Lectura; Ten-Minutes Reading in the Morning; and Reading Aloud by Parents in schools. This paper reports on the three movements from a review of the literature, personal observations, and practice. The paper discusses the historical and cultural background in Japan to inquire into relationships between these movements and systems or curricula of reading education. It states that three questions were used as research issues: (1) What should be done to promote students' reading regularly in daily life? (2) What should be done to encourage students to read critically? and (3) What should be done to change the curricula of the teaching of reading? It also states that the aim is to change the teaching of reading in Japan in the near future through practice in the growing trend of reading movements. (NKA)

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THE GROWING TREND OF READING MOVEMENTS IN JAPAN: ANIMACIÓN A LA LECTURA, TEN-MINUTES READING IN THE MORNING, AND READING ALOUD BY PARENTS

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S. Adachi

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to report the growing trend of reading movements in Japan and their origins. There are three main movements: Animación a la Lectura, Ten-Minutes Reading in the Morning, and Reading aloud by parents in schools. I will report three movements from literature, my observations, and my practice.

I tried to discuss the historical and cultural background in Japan to inquire into relationships between these movements and systems or curricula of reading education in this paper.

I believe that I can change the teaching of reading in Japan in the near future thorough my practice in the growing trend of reading movements.

2. BACKGROUND OF JAPAN

2.1 High literacy rate

Linguistic characteristics

The Japanese writing system is easy for young children to read, compared with English writing system. The Japanese writing system consists of hiragana, katakana and kanji characters. Hiragana and katakana are syllabic systems, represented by only 46 characters. Kanji is a set of ideographic characters delivered from Chinese characters and used in Japanese writing for many content words. We can show the reading of kanji by writing hiragana at its side. If children can read hiragana, they can read all books, because, they need not know the spelling. Therefore it is easy for Japanese, including children, to read books and, as a result, Japan is a nation with a high literacy rate (almost 100%).

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School systems

Japanese school systems were established at the end of nineteenth century. As Japanese people have been eager to study, the school attendance rate of compulsory education is almost 100% and the rate in high schools is about 96%. Almost all Japanese are literate.

High literacy rate but aliteracy

Aliteracy has become a serious problem. In spite of most people being literate, people do not read books regularly in daily life. Mainichi school reading survey, well known in Japan, reported in May (1997) that 15.0% of students at elementary school, 55.3% at junior high school, and 69.8% at high school read no books. I would like to call it 'aliteracy'. The main reason that students do not have enough reading time is watching TV for a long time, computer games, and competitive examinations. The Government then began to recognize this problem and the National Diet declared the Year 2000 "Children Reading Year" and, as a result, the rates have decreased.

2.2 The reading characteristics in Japan

Cooperative mentality and non opinion

Most Japanese tend to swallow the authors' ideas completely and not have their own opinions. This is because people are in a homogeneous situation and understand what each other think, without having to use words. It comes from Japanese society national isolationism from the seventeenth to nineteenth century by closing international exchange and consists of homogeneous ethnicity, that is, having almost no contact with 'foreign' cultures. Therefore people must cooperate in their group and have to agree with their prominent figures. It is difficult for a Japanese reader to have an opinion that is different to that of an author.

Absolute trust in textbooks

Many Japanese place absolute trust in authorized textbooks, they seldom disagree with authors and point out mistakes and do not tend to criticize severely. I think it is a result of Japanese history. Japanese have abandoned the national isolationist policy and acquired scientific and artistic knowledge since the end of the nineteenth century. People wanted to learn western science efficiently, with textbooks translated and edited by the Nation. Students read and memorized them, and gained western knowledge very quickly. Teachers, therefore, did not teach how to criticize authors and how to read other real books.

Emphasis on empathy

Teachers think that empathy with the characters in texts is important, when students read novels in Japanese educational settings. Teachers ask their students 'Then what does he/she feel?' Students do not analyze text but feel empathy from their own experience. Students may answer, 'He must be very sad' or 'She would be delighted perhaps.' Sympathizing with

somebody or fully understanding others' feelings is the most important factor for Japanese students in Japanese society.

2.3 Curricula on the teaching of Reading

In schools

There is no idea among teachers that 'every teacher is a reading teacher.' This comes from the belief that the responsibility for the teaching of reading is only teachers of Japanese. In addition teachers of other subjects do not encourage their students to use other sources except textbooks. Therefore teachers teach reading only in native Japanese language classrooms (the subject 'Language arts') and in the school library.

In the subject 'Language arts'

Teachers distinguish reading comprehension and reading books. Reading comprehension means sympathizing with characters from their own experiences. Reading books means reading real books completely. When students read real books, teachers have to pay attention to his/her preferences in order to teach reading comprehension, but children depend on their own feelings and they cannot follow logical procedures.

In school libraries

It is important for teaching of reading to know how to search for books, how to select a book which we should read, how to read it in the school library. There are, however, few school librarians in Japan. Students know where their school library is, when it opens, how to borrow books in the early day of school year, actually. Japanese textbooks are very thin, from one hundred pages to two hundred pages. As students read thin textbooks in class, they do not have to get new information, search for books for problem solving from media in school libraries. As a result, the Ministry of Education, Science, Sport and Culture finally decided to increase the number of school librarians by the year 2003 to change these poor students' reading environments. Absolute trust in textbooks would delay the development of school libraries.

By parents at home

Some parents guide their children to read when they are very young at home. Young mothers often read aloud picture books to their children. However when children become first graders and can read letters(hiragana and katakana), the mothers tend to stop reading aloud. Parents leave the guiding or teaching of reading to teachers because they are specialists of education generally. If parents take part in school education, they are considered to be rude. Some people believe that students are too busy for studying and doing extra-curricula activities and parents should not recommend reading books.

2.4 Research issues

I found the following three questions as research issues:

A) What should we do to promote students' reading regularly in daily life?
B) What should we do to encourage students to read critically?
C) What should we do to change the curricula of the teaching of reading?

The following movements that I report will help answer these questions.

3. TEN-MINUTES READING IN THE MORNING

3.1 Overview

There are four main principles in this movement; 1) everybody 2) everyday 3) the book which students like and 4) just reading. All students and teachers in the school bring a favorite book everyday for ten minutes reading. They buy books by themselves, or borrow from the school library by themselves. The reading time is only ten minutes, this means a feasible time to find time during the school schedule and teachers and students can continue to read in school everyday. They focus on silent reading single mindedly. They do not have follow-up activities such as talking about books. Today, it is very hard for teachers to control their classrooms. Some teachers can not control their class rooms at all. We call it classroom chaos or the collapse of the classroom. The silent reading is effective in classroom chaos. After the students have read silently, the atmosphere in the classroom improves and becomes somewhere students can learn. Students need not try to read difficult books that they dislike, therefore, they can read at their own pace.

A publication of a book was instrumental in increasing this movement in 1993. It was written by a teacher of a private high school. He wanted a special activity that cheered up weak students and this became a feature of this school. The book said how students delighted in reading, enjoy reading and like books. A lot of teachers supported this movement and nowadays there are about 5000 schools enjoying this practice, where students and teachers read for ten-minutes every morning.

3.2 Comment

Ten-minutes reading in the morning fits the Japanese very well. The author got a hint from Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) Program of "The Read-Aloud Handbook" by Jim Trelease. Non-accountability is one of the important elements of SSR (Pilgreen, 1995). Students read books and feel something but they do not explain anything to others. Ten-minutes reading also emphasizes on 'just reading', it brought about a broad expansion of this movement in a lot of Japanese schools.

Students are not illiterate and do not dislike reading, they do not read books regularly in daily life because they do not have the habit of reading and a specific time to read each day. If students have a specific reading time, they will read something regularly. In this movement, we can promote students' regular reading in daily life (issue A).

4. ANIMACIÓN A LA LECTURA

4.1 Overview

Animación a la Lectura is a Spanish reading movement in non-formal education. It has 75 strategies with game like activities. Since it was translated into Japanese in 1997, classroom teachers, librarians and parents have developed new style games to match the Japanese education system. Students enjoy the games and want to read more and more.

The advocate of this movement, Montserrat Sarto, Spanish journalist of children's books, distinguishes 'didactico(didactics)' and 'educación (education)' and she argues Animación a la Lectura is not 'didactico' but 'educación'. 'Didactico' is duty and formal education (subject). On the other hand, 'educación' is not duty and students can decide if they want to participate in the games. Students must have read the book within 2 weeks, except for young children. When an animador (animator, tutor of the game) starts the game, he/she distributes a card to every student who wants to participate, a question (riddle) is written on each card. At first every student must answer for himself/herself, they have to think deeply. Second, when they cannot answer it themselves, another student can help. Third, students express their opinions and exchange views about the book. The question consists of important elements or aspects of reading. Whenever students answer questions, they can learn how to read and what reading is, therefore it is highly likely they will experience the pleasure of reading and the pleasure of communicating.

This is based on the schema theory. Students acquire a lot of schema, understanding action of characters, having critical opinions, catching the meaning of topics, grasping the structure of text, and so on. Once student have a schema, they use it when they read new books.

4.2 Comment

The basic activity of this movement is peer interaction. Recent psychological research refers to the significance on Vygotsky's idea of interaction and communication. Although reading is naturally an individual action, readers must account to peers what he/she thought. Showing the reason why I think or how I analyze text is the basis of criticizing. The main goals of this movement are to help students attain critical reading skills and personality development and so on. Therefore this is a good method to solve issue B, encouraging students to read critically. It may be hard for Japanese readers to accept this movement

because of the tendency of no opinion, though Japanese need the ability to read critically. As a result, some co-researchers and I are planning a project funded by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture to promote Animación a la Lectura.

5. READING ALOUD BY PARENTS AS VOLUNTEERS

5.1 Overview

Reading aloud by volunteers involves parents. They go to schools and read books aloud outside of classroom teaching. There are a variety of styles of reading aloud including different numbers of volunteers and the ideas that the volunteers bring with them. I will introduce three types, which I am observing and participating in.

1) A mother visits school during a twenty minutes recess in the morning. Students who want to listen to the reading aloud gather in a room especially set aside for this purpose.
2) Sixty mothers (ten people, in each of the six grades) register as volunteers. Twelve mothers (two people, in each of the six grades) go every Tuesday and read aloud, but all mothers have meetings and select the most appropriate books.
3) Twelve parents (four people, in each of three grades) go to school once every two weeks. A parent takes charge of a class. Teachers of Japanese language select two thirds of the books, and parents select one third of their favorite books.

5.2 Comment

There are various styles of reading aloud activities. Common points among the activities are 1) they are held outside classroom time 2) find new significance in books and 3) volunteers select books. This is a very new tendency, in contrast to the traditional teaching style and system of reading in Japan. In the traditional style, teachers teach reading to all of the students with a textbook. However the teacher's and parent's role have changed with this movement. It may be restructuring of reading curricula. We have begun to notice that reading abilities (included reading habit and critical reading) are not fostered when we teach traditional teaching methods and system of reading. This movement will become a solution to issue C, changing the curricula of the teaching of reading.

Many Japanese teachers are intellectual, have high status' and take charge in education as specialists. Therefore, parents or community members seldom come to schools and become involved in the education of students. If they do such a thing, they are recognized as rude and arrogant. However this situation has been changing in recent years and parents and community members have become more interested in school education. This reading movement has been developing due to such a background.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Why are these movements new?

The Japanese educational and historical background and each of the reading movements have been reviewed in this paper. These movements can solve current problems related to Japanese reading. Aliterate students can read regularly and critically and then can connect reading in schools to home life.

Common points of these movements are using extracurricular periods, changing the teacher's role and focusing on the student's motivation. I will try to design new teaching of reading under these movements.

6.2 New design of teaching of reading

Lave and Wenger (1991) said learning is a process that a newcomer participates legitimately in a community. Community consists of local community members, family, and people who are interested in reading. Waterland (1985) described a reading program where parents read with children like 'Reading aloud by volunteers'. We need to transform the view of learning. These three movements are ones of realization of a new view of learning. Therefore the new design of teaching of reading will be based on a new view of learning in order to establish a 'reading community'.

Schools and local communities, inter and extra curricula, textbook and real books, classroom and home, library, and reader, author, publisher, must cooperate together. They will create a big reading community and interact each other. At the beginning, people should come to school and participate in reading activities with students such as reading aloud by volunteers.

In addition to 'open' schools, continuity of these activities will be important. We must discuss how we can manage reading communities to teach continuously.

6.3 My research activities

In order to practice these programs, we must promote these movements much more in Japan.

As Ten-Minutes Reading in the Morning is very suitable to Japanese mentalities and reading habits, it will spread to more schools. However some teachers may find children cannot continue reading silently because they are tired and bored with just reading. They might try to practice additional activities. It is my intention to observe them.

Original Animación a la lectura expects different reading styles and Japanese reading ability, we must emphasize the significance of this movement in Japan, as my colleagues and I organize Japanese branches of this movement. We will analyze Montserrat's method and hold a seminar for Japanese teachers and librarians next year. We try to focus on critical thinking of reading in Japan.

Reading aloud by volunteers needs more research and practice. How do different ages and characteristics of students affect reading aloud? What should we do as follow-up activities of reading aloud? What is needed to develop the style of reading aloud? We have started a reading aloud research project, and intend to compare reading aloud with reading silently, and will answer these questions.

We can put into practice new ways of reading by these activities.

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